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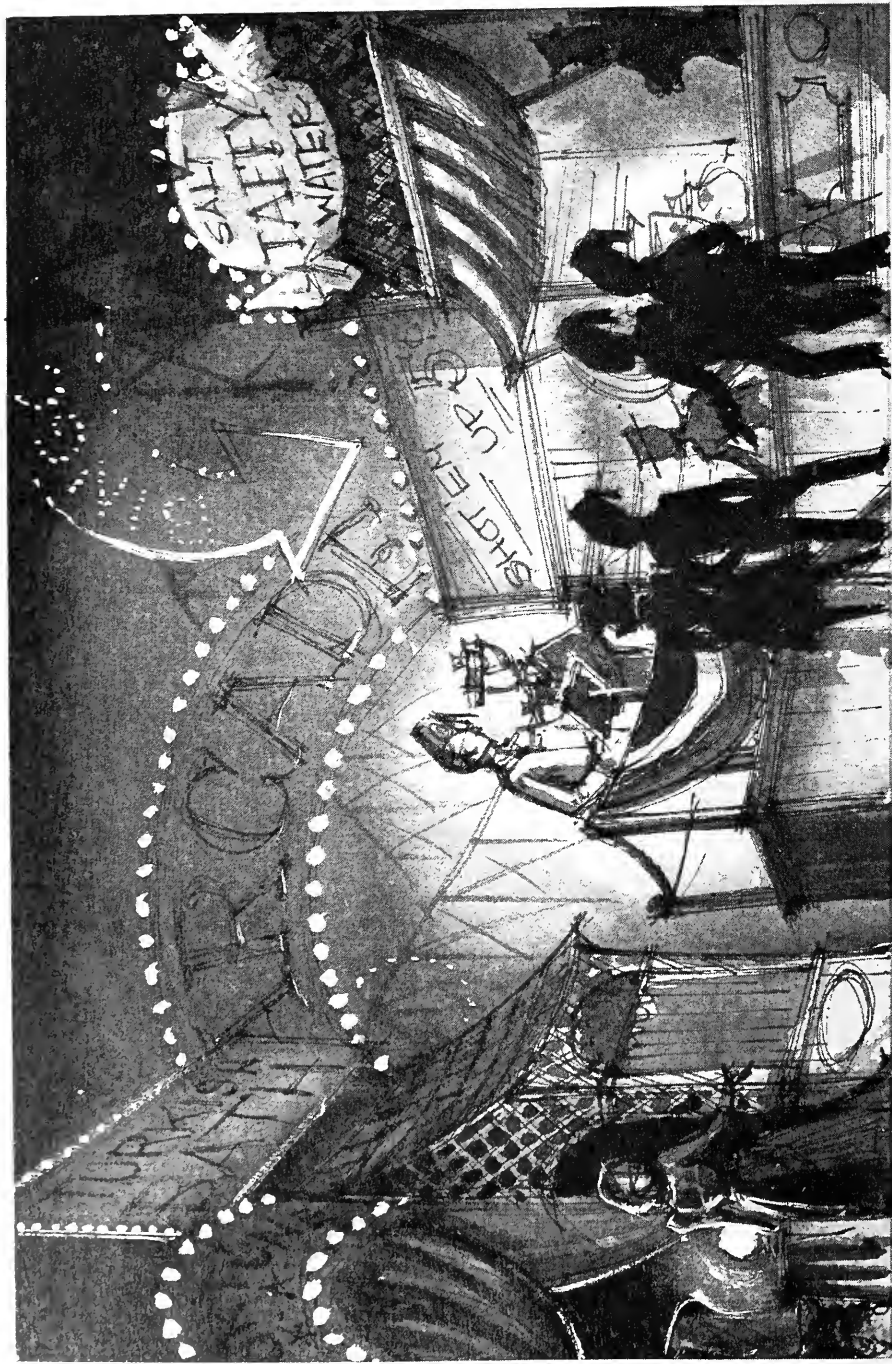
Thornton Wilder  
Number

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SKIN OF OUR TEETH  
THUMBNAIL SKETCH ACT II

LEAHY '67

# The Wilder "Image"

• Richard H. Goldstone

Unlike Scott Fitzgerald, or Ernest Hemingway or Norman Mailer, Thornton Wilder has not, during his forty years as a well-known writer, merged a private life with a public personality; he doesn't, in Madison Avenue terms, "project an image."

His interviews, for example, have confined themselves to writing, principally to his own—what he has tried to achieve, what he hopes to achieve in the future—to what he regards as excellence, to those matters which help or hinder serious writers. Without being secretive, indeed through his refreshing candor, he has convinced feature writers that his personality and his way of life make drab copy. In the nineteenth-century tradition of the New England school, he abjures the cult of personality, insisting that his writings alone constitute the appropriate bond between him and his audience. And indeed, it is the sturdy fiber beneath the deceptively easy surface of any work of Wilder—one or two of the brahmins of criticism to the contrary—which has kept his novels in print and his plays on the boards.

So that over the years there has developed no Wilder image, no identifiable portrait; even in his hometown, New Haven, he circulates through town and across the Yale campus generally unrecognized. He appeared *once*—fifteen years ago—on television playing a part in some scenes from a benefit performance of *Our Town*. Although he helplessly squirmed through a *Time* cover story in 1953, he has never been "profiled" in *The New Yorker*, nor been photographed endorsing a whiskey, a cigarette, or a dentifrice.

For the great majority who read his work or view his plays, the name of Thornton Wilder is held in high and affectionate esteem; but the man behind the name has been volitionally fading from view.

Wilder is one of that ever-shrinking band of American writers born in the nineteenth century, who achieved his initial fame during the ferment of the 1920's. Among his contemporaries, the greater number are retired or dead; many of the established and renowned writers who welcomed Wilder to their ranks are become dimly remembered names, their stories or plays or poems surviving only in the basements of secondhand bookshops or in the attics of old houses . . . Floyd Dell . . . James Branch Cabell . . . Arthur Davison Ficke . . . Edward Sheldon. . .

Nowadays the only people who can count on seeing Wilder regularly are the customs officials on either side of the Atlantic. But his novels circulate with a dependable regularity in the public libraries; his prose style is examined and analyzed in the schools and colleges; amateur theater groups enact and re-enact his short plays; on several continents, professional companies tackle *The Skin of Our Teeth*, *Our Town*, and *The Matchmaker*. His latest novel has just been published.

I suspect that precisely because no clear image of Wilder has manifested itself and because of the durable quality of his work, the questions persist: What kind of man is Thornton Wilder? What kind of life has he led?

Obviously, a comprehensive answer to such questions is to be found only in his biography or autobiography, neither of which has yet been written. Nevertheless, Wilder has provided a number of significant clues about what he is, what he believes in. They are to be found in the work itself, in his published conversations with journalists, in the very nature of his various undertakings.

One revealing aspect of his life has been his military service in both World Wars. Part of the miraculous hold that Wilder's work exerts upon its audience has as its basis an implicit love of country. Wilder's patriotism is intense without being mawkish, steadfast without being chauvinist; his work interprets, illuminates, and glorifies what it is to be an American, even though his greatest popular success, *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, pays homage to Spanish and French culture, even though his first novel, *The Cabala*, depicts some of the grandeur that was Rome.

Wilder was born in Madison, Wisconsin, in 1897, but his New England roots go back several generations. At the age of nine he accompanied his parents to China, but in less than a year he came back with his mother, brother, and sisters to Berkeley, California. After a second year in China, when he was fourteen, he returned to the United States, and for the next eight years he continued his education in California, Oberlin, Ohio, and finally Yale—where, after service with the Coast Artillery, he was graduated in 1920.

Among his classmates and friends at Yale were Walter Millis, the historian; Stephen Vincent Benét, author of *John Brown's Body*; Robert Maynard Hutchins, who, later, as chancellor of the University of Chicago, appointed Wilder to the English faculty; and Henry Luce, whom Wilder had formerly known at school in China. Some of Wilder's classmates, who might have achieved comparable fame, were killed in the war which did not make the world safe for democracy.

When, in *Our Town*, The Narrator points to the graves of Civil War veterans, he says, not with irony or bitterness, but with poignancy:

“—New Hampshire boys—had a notion that the Union might be kept together, though they'd never seen more than fifty miles of it themselves. All they knew was the name, friends—The United States of America. The United States of America. And they went and died for it.”

So also had Wilder's classmates in 1918. Those lines, one senses, are as much for them as they are for the New Hampshire boys about whom they're written.

Wilder's first direct contact with Europe—and the beginning of a life-long love affair with it—came about directly after his graduation when he was sent as a fellow for a year's study to the American Academy in Rome.

What he remembers, most vividly, about the year in Rome was that

We took field trips and in a small way took part in the diggings. Once you have swung a pickax that will reveal the curve of a street four thousand years covered

over which was once an active, much-traveled highway, you are never quite the same again. You look at Times Square as a place about which you imagine some day scholars saying, "There appears to have been some kind of public center here—"

The archaeological experience served as a kind of counterbalance to his love of country, to his conviction that the American was the "last best hope on earth." His diggings in Rome gave him a sense of the vastness of time and space so that his plays attempt "to find dignity in the trivial of our daily life, against those preposterous stretches which seem to rob it of any such dignity."

Wilder's absorption with Rome is a thread that runs throughout his entire life. The late Henry Luce recalled that as a fourteen-year-old scholar in the English Mission School at Chefoo, "Thornton was seldom to be seen without his copy of Ovid." Ten years later, when Luce, on Christmas vacation in Rome from his year at Oxford, looked up Wilder, Luce was shown by his classmate "all the Roman ruins, with Thornton translating every last inscription."

Rome was the inspiration not only of *The Cabala*, but also of the novel that Glenway Wescott considers Wilder's masterpiece, *The Ides of March*.

In 1921 Wilder returned to the United States to earn his livelihood as a schoolmaster at Lawrenceville Academy, near Princeton, New Jersey; his duties were divided between teaching preparatory school French and supervising the day-to-day regimen of rich men's sons; he supplemented his income by tutoring, or traveling with a small group of students from the school. After four years of this routine, Wilder had scraped together enough money to take a leave in order to enter the graduate school of nearby Princeton, ostensibly to earn a master of arts degree in French; his real objective was to provide himself with enough leisure to work on a new novel.

At Lawrenceville, he had not completed many chapters of an earlier one when a Yale classmate, Louis Baer, newly become a partner of A. & C. Boni, submitted the half-finished novel to Albert Boni. With his legendary perceptiveness, Boni immediately placed Wilder under contract. A few months ago, Boni, now a frighteningly youthful seventy-four, described to me that in an early meeting with Wilder, the aspiring and unpublished writer proposed that Boni expend no money promoting the book . . . that he somehow let it find its readers. Boni, recalling Wilder's naiveté, chuckled. He ignored, of course, the younger man's suggestion. The reception to *The Cabala*, though not tumultuous, was good, good enough so that Wilder was encouraged to complete a second novel, which Boni was happy to publish.

While *The Cabala* had been about aristocratic life in contemporary Rome, Wilder's new novel with an eighteenth-century Peruvian setting—all about love but without a love story—was as unlikely a contender for the best seller lists of 1927 as anything that boomtime America could conceive. It was the year that serious readers were buying Sinclair Lewis's *Elmer Gantry*, Dreiser's *The Financier*, and Hemingway's *Men Without Women*. That is to say, realistic-naturalistic fiction was secure in the saddle. But for reasons that have been analyzed yet never explained, Wilder's *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*

sold well over a quarter of a million copies in its first year of publication. It also catapulted an obscure and astonished young author into international celebrity.

Concluding with some reluctance that the schoolmaster's and the writer's life could not be combined, Wilder resigned from his post and without abandoning his role as novelist began turning his attention to what had always been with him a central preoccupation: the theater.

The production of *Our Town* in 1938 is generally assumed to be Wilder's first incursion into the theater world. Actually, his involvement with theater began while he was still a high school student at Berkeley when he avidly attended stock company matinees in neighboring Oakland. Wilder at sixteen years of age was writing into the fly-leaves of his algebra text the table of contents of a projected volume of three minute plays; twelve years later, in 1928, a selection of these short plays which Wilder had composed during that time was published as *The Angel That Troubled the Waters*.

Both at Berkeley and later at Oberlin, Wilder also composed a number of playlets and vaudeville sketches which unlike the three minute plays were performed by the author and his classmates. While still an undergraduate at New Haven, Wilder published in the Yale literary magazine a full-length play, *The Trumpet Shall Sound*, which an off-Broadway group enacted in the fall of 1926.

Wilder was in no rush to get a play on Broadway. In his determination to become a playwright, he moved slowly and cautiously. He wrote a series of one-act plays which were produced in the early thirties by student groups at Yale and the University of Chicago. From these skillful amateur productions, Wilder learned an enormous amount about stagecraft.

Wilder's next theatrical venture was a translation of Obey's *Le Viol de Lucrèce*, which starred Katharine Cornell in a 1932 Broadway production. Five years later he performed a similar service for Ruth Gordon by adapting and translating Ibsen's *A Doll's House*.

All in all, Wilder waited ten years after completing *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* before he submitted to Jed Harris his first mature full-length play. Having begun its writing at the MacDowell Colony, Wilder completed *Our Town* in the late summer of 1937 in a mountain village outside of Zurich, Switzerland. Wilder brought the play to Harris in Paris, and the director-producer began arrangements for an immediate New York production; the two men's faith in each other made theatrical history, and *Our Town* has become what is probably America's best-known native play.

Before he had even completed writing *Our Town*, Wilder—bewitched by the comedic genius of Austrian dramatist Johann Nestroy—began work on his own version of Nestroy's *Einen Jux Will Er Sich Machen*. After having launched *Our Town*, Wilder completed his comedy and offered it to the great Max Reinhardt, who had fled Nazified Austria and established himself in Hollywood. But *The Merchant of Yonkers*, conceived by Wilder as a rollicking farce, apparently amused no one, least of all the critics. Wilder the dramatist was temporarily discredited until *The Skin of Our Teeth* won him his third Pulitzer Prize three years later.

Wilder was about the only person who refused to believe that *The*

*Merchant of Yonkers* was a bad play. I recall in 1944, in a bar in Rome, his insisting that *The Merchant* was technically superior to both *Our Town* and *The Skin of Our Teeth*. At the time, I attributed his defense of the play either to the quality of the cognac available under wartime conditions or to the impulse of a parent to favor the ill-favored child.

His abiding faith in *The Merchant of Yonkers*, of course, has been long since vindicated. Invited to submit a play to the 1954 Edinburgh Festival, Wilder changed the title from *The Merchant of Yonkers* to *The Matchmaker*, made a few minor revisions in the text, acquired Tyrone Guthrie as director and Ruth Gordon as Mrs. Dolly Levi, with resultant successes in Edinburgh, London, and New York. (Ten years later *The Matchmaker* was transformed into a musical comedy and as *Hello, Dolly!* it has been an international phenomenon with Carol Channing, Betty Grable, Mary Martin, and Ginger Rogers concurrently appearing in separate companies.)

Wilder's absorption with the theater since World War II, while it has not abated, has been less than single-minded. He has resumed his role as novelist twice: first, between 1946-48, when he worked on *The Ides of March*; and during the past four years, when he wrote the newly finished *The Eighth Day*.

But during the past twenty years he has also written two full-length plays, *The Alcestiad* and *The Emporium*. The former was performed at the 1955 Edinburgh Festival and has subsequently been produced in Zurich, Frankfurt, and Vienna (in a German language translation). He has never released it for an American production. *The Emporium*, which a handful of denizens of Cambridge and New Haven have heard Wilder read, has never been mounted.

In addition, there are two cycles of short plays, *The Seven Deadly Sins* and *The Seven Ages of Man*, which Wilder works on from time to time. Three of the plays from the two series were performed on New York's Bleeker Street in 1962.

Wilder is essentially a man without hobbies, at least as the term is generally understood. He never took up golf, but he used to enjoy accompanying William Lyons Phelps and Gene Tunney while they played their eighteen holes. Nor does he hunt, or fish, or play cards, or raise animals. Or garden.

When he's not writing, he reads. And when he's tired of reading, he walks. (A sturdy physique is the legacy of his years as a solitary long-distance runner). And he fills in short stretches of time with word games: double crostics and anagrams. Dickens's biographer, Edgar Johnson, recalls that he and Wilder shared the anagram championship during the early thirties at the MacDowell Colony.

Two projects have absorbed Wilder for years, his real hobbies. One of them has been his attempts to date—through internal evidence—the hundreds of undated plays by Shakespeare's Spanish contemporary, Lope de Vega. Wilder's other major outside interest has been annotating James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*. My colleague, Arthur Zeiger, was present when Wilder spoke to the Joyce Society about his progress in unraveling the secrets of that arcane novel. After his presentation, one lady addressed herself to Wilder asking him if all the hundreds of hours he had obviously given over to his study of the work did not constitute a waste of time. Wilder looked momen-

tarily startled and then asked the lady if by any chance she were a bridge player. When she admitted that she was, Wilder said happily: "Madame, between your way of wasting time and mine, allow me mine."

Wilder has often said that he is by instinct and temperament more a teacher than a writer. He entered the teaching profession, of course, because it seemed the most congenial means to a livelihood. Only two years after establishing himself as a writer and retiring from Lawrenceville, he returned to teaching at the University of Chicago, a connection he did not entirely sever until the summer of 1941. Since then, Wilder has taught both at Harvard, where he was Charles Eliot Norton Professor, and at several European universities.

A number of Wilder's former students have achieved academic and literary distinction: Robert Ardrey, as playwright and author; Professor Harry T. Moore, as critic, editor, and biographer of D. H. Lawrence; Professor Robert Stallman, as American cultural historian and biographer of Stephen Crane. A great many men and women—Garson Kanin and Ruth Gordon among them—who have never been enrolled in one of Wilder's college courses, regard him nevertheless as mentor, counselor, and intellectual guide. Many times Wilder has played Vergil—whom he reveres—to aspiring latter-day Dantes.

Wilder was seventy April seventeenth. More than five years ago, on the occasion of his sixty-fifth birthday, he announced his "retirement," went off to Arizona leaving no forwarding address. And though he has since re-emerged from the desert, friends and associates no longer see him in his usual haunts.

Wilder spent the first four years of his "retirement" writing what has turned out to be his longest novel and what appears to be his most ambitiously conceived one. *The Eighth Day* takes up the history at the beginning of the twentieth century of two midwestern American families. Having seen the work through to its publication, Wilder has resumed his hermitic existence to take up work on his next book.

Home for Wilder has always been the place to come back to after he has completed a work in progress. He resides in a hilly wooded area of Hamden, a New Haven suburb, and a ten minute drive from his alma mater, Yale. Wilder's plain brown frame home was built for his family and himself in 1929 out of the proceeds of *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*. Commodious but unpretentious—a professor's house, really—it is cared for by Isabel Wilder, who for the past twenty-one years has seen to it that there has been a home waiting for her brother when his journeys end.

Visitors are sometimes disappointed by the utter absence of the trophies and memorabilia that are associated with the homes of the celebrated and famous: no signed photographs or framed letters from presidents of the United States and famous actresses; no shelf of deluxe editions of the author's work; no display of Wilder's three Pulitzer Prizes; nothing really that would tempt either a burglar or a curio snatcher. A piano but no television. A dining room but no dishwasher. A terrace but no barbecue. A garden but no pool. It's a quiet, restful home, fine for reading galley proofs and for seeing old friends.



What truly unifies Wilder's life and work is that impulse never quite fully expressed in our national literature but manifested in the achievements of such men and women as social philosopher Bronson Alcott, painter Thomas Eakins, composer Charles Ives, urban reformer Jane Addams, and the late Adlai Stevenson. The response that Wilder's writing evokes is an awareness of the almost stifled American capacity for celebrating the meditative, the serene, the reverential sense of life, the ultimately Vergilian pathos which concerns itself with the tears of things.

Those who as students, or as colleagues, or as friends have known the man himself can only marvel at the harmony which Thornton Wilder has achieved in fusing the progress of his life with the spirit of his art.

## The Purple Crop

• John N. Miller

The seeds were there, I guess; and so  
after all the spadework and the weary-armed  
shaping of plots, we threw them in—two rows  
of eggplant—every one of which came  
clod-bursting up, until their mammoth leaves  
outspread all others; then, almost before  
we knew it, blooms were out, the slow-heaved  
purpling flesh, and the stalks hung low with hoards  
of dark-sheened fruit.

Ah yes—a glorious crop;  
but, when we culled and cooked some, we found out  
that none of us liked them. It was hard: to stop  
caring for them, to pick our usual lot—  
cabbages, beans, or a turnip.

Sometimes, though,  
the old man would meander with old friends  
out to the garden—where, between the rows  
heavy with purple, he'd tell of the splendid  
eggplant we had raised; and as he faced  
their glossy roundness with his own imposing  
figures, we almost approved their taste.

# Wilder and the Germans

• Hans Sahl

Thornton Wilder's *The Skin of Our Teeth* was the first American play to be performed in occupied Germany shortly after the end of World War II.

The impact of this play, shown in unheated, half-destroyed theaters and before audiences deprived of food as well as of intellectual and moral standards, can hardly be described. It was an event of major importance not only in the history of the German theater but also in the history of German rehabilitation and self-identification. Germany had lost a war. She had also lost her soul. It was through Wilder's eyes that life could be seen as something worthwhile attempting again.

From a technical point of view, Wilder's play brought to the impoverished German scene memories of a glorious theatrical past, overflowing with experiments and new ideas in the field of staging and directing. It was truly "modern" in the sense that it combined elements of Brecht's "epic" theater with Meyerhold's purified ascetic style and Pirandello's attempts to break down the barriers between stage and reality. But its message went beyond the realm of a unique theatrical experience. Here was an American author who, on the strength of his imagination as a contemporary writer, had anticipated the mood of a nation which had gone through hell and was yearning for something new to believe in. Wilder's *The Skin of Our Teeth* demonstrated, through the fate of Mr. and Mrs. Antrobus of Excelsior, N. J., the survival of the human race throughout the ages, its heroic struggle against enormous catastrophe from without and within, the eternal conflict between progress and destruction, hope and despair, and the final belief in the Spiritual, *das Geistige*, i.e., in the power of the *Word* which was at the beginning of Creation and which is to be with us unto the end of all days.

What better thing could be told by the author of a victorious country, willing to help and give comfort to a people who for fourteen years had been exposed to a doctrine of hatred, contempt for the intellect, and glorification of the most aggressive, the most cruel instincts in man? With *The Skin of Our Teeth* a new world of hope and of confidence in the *word* emerged from the German stage, culminating in that unforgettable scene where posters with quotations from Plato, Spinoza, the Bible were carried around by actors who themselves had escaped annihilation by "the skin of their teeth."

Wilder's message to the Germans was not confined to one play alone. It was repeated and sustained, although on a different level, by *Our Town*, a play of simple human decency, of simple human beings in a simple American town at the beginning of this century. It was less "sophisticated" than *The Skin of Our Teeth*, less apocalyptic and ambitious in its pursuit of cataclysmic stage devices. Yet its very tranquillity, its preoccupation with the problems of life and death in a small community, and its "planetarian" view

from far away, as from another world, into the heart of everyone, did not fail to make a deep impression upon those who had forgotten what the word *decency* meant and who had witnessed the transformation of many a "common man" into an ardent member of Hitler's extermination teams.

Thus Wilder had become a German *Klassiker* almost over night. His plays, including *The Matchmaker*, in which almost every German actress of distinction celebrated a triumphant success as Dolly, have been performed all over West Germany during the past twenty years and are still at the disposal of German repertory theaters, where they are shown frequently. His novels, especially *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* and *The Ides of March*, are equally considered to be among the most important contributions to modern literature. Many books about his books and plays have been written, and there is scarcely one German university whose English or drama department has not promoted at least one doctoral thesis about Wilder, and of various aspects of his work.

There were other American playwrights, to be sure, who hit the German stage after the War: Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams, for instance, both also very successful and highly acclaimed by German audiences but not with the same, almost religious, reverence. There seemed to exist a certain affinity between Wilder and the German postwar mind—not only because he was able to express what millions felt at the zero hour of their destiny but also because in both cases *music* played a considerable part in the development of their philosophical outlook.

German metaphysical thought always liked to link music with the idea of death and eternity. Mozart, to whom Wilder feels deeply indebted ever since the days of his childhood, once wrote to his father that he never went to bed without visualizing the possibility that he might not wake up the next morning. But this thought did not make him feel sad or discouraged; on the contrary, it helped him to survive and to feel serene, even cheerful.

There is in Wilder something of Mozart's serenity, of the latter's capacity to face death at any moment without being afraid of it. It is the serenity of those who know about the ambiguities of human endeavor without losing sight of their ultimate goal, which is the reaffirmation of human existence, the serenity of Mozart's late chamber music, and of Wilder's acceptance of small-town life as an ironic reflex of some supreme order unknown to man.

## To the Artist

• Thomas Kretz

Frail the lily whorl  
Painted for the palm of Joseph,  
Frail the thin petals  
Of your effeminate fingers.

Pale virility  
Faded as bent androecia,  
Pale your worn image  
Idly dawdling on sprouting staff.

# Farce and the Heavenly Destination

• Joseph J. Firebaugh

Mr. Thornton Wilder is a serious writer, one of the most serious of our day—if commitment and dedication and high purpose are signs of seriousness. He is also a writer of farce, and one of the best of any day. These two facts may seem contradictory. A long tradition of disparagement of farce is so firmly rooted in critical practice that the word itself usually suggests inferiority. The fact that the word means “stuffing,” the fact that farces were often written to fill out a program, provides an apparent semantic justification for such usage. The fact that farce has often been trivial, depending on buffoonery, slapstick, disguise, misunderstanding, sight-gags, recognition scenes delayed so long as to convince any audience of the feeble-mindedness of everyone concerned—all these have contributed to the atmosphere of the absurd and irresponsible which seems to justify the denigration of farce.

Farce is indeed absurd—and even in the present intellectual atmosphere, in which the word *absurd* has a certain critical status, the absurdity of farce has been made to score against it. A tragic absurdity is allowable, a riotously farcical absurdity is not. Is the reason some self-flagellating need to maintain critical dignity? One wonders why. Farce is as serious as tragedy. It is capable of a serious critical treatment. If it has not been defended as frequently as poetry has been, perhaps one reason is that its audience has not demanded a defense. Aristophanes' *The Birds* maintained itself in Ypsilanti, Michigan, during the summer of 1966, and the audience found no sober-sided objections to Bert Lahr's transfer of the lines of a television commercial into the ancient script. Farce justifies itself.

The Marx Brothers, the Keystone Cops, Charle Chaplin have an immediacy of appeal which is as great for the child or the untutored mind, seeing the farce at a very low level, as for the sophisticated wit, responding to each nuance of the farcical situation or dialogue. Farce is, of course, by its detractors supposed to be without nuance, to be executed in such broad strokes as to render refinement of analysis a wasted effort. To the unanalytical, nothing need be analyzed.

Yet analysis cannot be avoided. It reveals at once the ultra-logical quality of farce. The implied question of farce is always “What if . . . ?”—another form of the “As if . . .”—and it pushes that question as far as it can possibly be pushed. The results are absurd, but not merely absurd. For there is always an underlying seriousness. If matters were allowed to go this far, the writer of farce says, this is what would be likely to happen. He invites his audience to see what would happen. What would happen always reveals a serious defect. The audience is invited to experience a serious awareness of the defect of

pursuing a position to its ultimate extreme. It is invited at the same time to enjoy the ludicrous results in a kind of socially irresponsible presentation of them. Thus wisdom and mirth are alike served. The illogic of the logical is perceived: the audience is allowed the advantage of both. As Eric Bentley says in his brilliant essay on farce, "One is permitted the outrage but spared the consequences." Farce contains, he further points out, "very little 'harmless' joking."<sup>1</sup> Serious matters are held up to serious criticism—but the serious criticism is both revealed and concealed by violent action and swift play of language. Pieties are outraged. Reality is unmasked, proprieties are offended, truth is laid bare. The audience savors its ambivalent view: "What if . . . ?" eventuates in quasi-acceptance of the *status quo*. But the outrageous sequence of events makes full acceptance, full reconciliation needless. In full acceptance, in reconciliation, there is implicit sadness. Farce, with its high spirits, moderates the implicitly sad; when reconciliation becomes uncomfortable, one may alleviate doubt by stripping away another level of appearance and enjoying the absurdity of logic, before agreeing again to participate, somewhat sadly, in an illogical world.

After the success of several serious novels, including the fantastically popular *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, Thornton Wilder chose to write a farcical novel, *Heaven's My Destination*. He deserted the romanticized ancient world of *The Woman of Andros*, and the exotic settings of *The Cabala* and *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, and placed his novel in the Middle West. His protagonist is George Brush, the unimaginative fundamentalist book-salesman, stupid and well-meaning, unable to find a trace of talent in *King Lear*, greatly worried about that fact, and determined anyhow to memorize that play; dedicated to the abstract ideal of the American home, but unable to grasp the needs of the individual human beings who must make up that abstraction.

In a succession of farcical incidents, George Brush violates the practical realities in defense of his ideals. His conviction that money at interest is an evil leads to a run on a bank. His conviction of the sacramental nature of marriage leads to a violation of the love on which it is based: he will marry a girl he has wronged whether she wishes it or not. On the other hand, his abstract idealism and his abundant and stupid respect for other human beings prevent him from seeing, in one outrageously funny sequence, that he has been introduced into a brothel for Sunday dinner with the Madam and her girls—which establishment he sees as a type of the American home. His ideals combine with his inexperience to prevent him from seeing the truth.

Yet from another perspective it can be seen that his abstract ideals enable him to see the truth. That love of money is evidence of fear and productive of evil is true enough. The absurd run on the bank demonstrates the truth of George Brush's contention. The Kansas City madam and her girls are in fact less depraved than those who have played a gross practical joke on George. They are innocent of evil, as George Brush is a fool in Christ. The cliché "fallen woman" is enough to terrify George when he finally knows the truth; but until the cliché, the abstract thought, comes to condemn him, he accepts Mrs. Crofut and her girls at what—to him—is face value.

Thus farce is made to serve both sides of the truth—sin and sanctity.

George resumes his heavenly destination after many similar farcical vicissitudes have led him to loss of faith and to a brief absurd experiment in worldliness. He continues his career as a fool in Christ. His farcical misadventures evidently are to continue indefinitely. Their result has been twofold—he has lost his faith and regained it. During his faithless time, he tells a stupid minister of God, "I'll bet you believe in war," and, further, that one "thing that shows that there is no God is that he allows such foolish people to be ministers." He sees thus the truths all worldlings see: the hypocrisy and stupidity of mankind. This perception is followed almost at once by a return of religious faith, as a result of Father Pasziewski's bequest of a silver spoon. George's way to his heavenly destination is to continue its absurd course. He arranges for the college education of a pretty waitress who reads Darwin; his faith is now strong enough to include those of little faith. The illogic of bigotry—exclusive faith—has been replaced by the illogic of tolerance—of an inclusive faith. Farce reveals the folly of the stock character—be he miser, bigot, saint, prude, misanthropist—in his abstract commitment to fixed values. The revelation leads him to his folly of accepting other stock characters and his encouraging them in their pursuits, however fallacious these may seem to him. In his new folly there is room for the fallacious—or for the contradicting truth. The man of faith subsidizes the girl who reads Darwin—although earlier in the book just such a girl's beliefs had horrified him. Faith in action is a noble farce.

The sudden turn which often happens at the end of a farce, in which the character repudiates earlier values, has the force of revelation. Conversion is absurd, in religion as elsewhere, because no man can be what he is not. Yet it is the absurdity for which religion strives. It is hard to believe that Plautus's braggart captain can mean that he has been well punished for his adulterous life; hard to believe that George Brush achieves tolerance. Yet it is the hard-to-believe that gives both farce and faith its point, that makes them both worthwhile. George says, "I made the mistake all my life of thinking you could get better and better until you were perfect." That thought was absurd; but in its abandonment is a new absurdity, the perfection of tolerance: its perfection consists in its imperfection, in the sublime nonsense of subsidizing one's opponent.

What the result will be of subsidizing one's opponent is of course open to question. It is the democratic faith that the activity is worthwhile: that the cannibalistic young should be subsidized, their dissent made powerful by scholarships from the public funds; that foreign aid should subsidize commercial competitiveness—at the very least.

The act of faith in future generations is constantly renewed in Mr. Wilder's farces, though no one knows what the results will be of this substance of things hoped for, this evidence of things not seen. The ambivalence of faith in the future is expressed by the eternal trollop, Lily Sabina, in that marvelous farce, *The Skin of Our Teeth*.

Each new child that's born to the Antrobuses seems to them to be sufficient reason for the whole universe's being set in motion; and each new child that dies seems to them

to have been spared a whole world of sorrow, and what the end of it will be is still very much an open question.  
(Act I)

Yet this faith in the future of mankind needs to be supported by something more than the ideal faith. Mrs. Dolly Levi (*née* Gallagher) has her feet firmly planted upon material goods. As to money, she says,

How much is enough when one is thinking about children and the future? The future is the most expensive luxury in the world. . . . (*The Matchmaker*, Act I)

The future is, however, the luxury to which the human race is inevitably committed—the luxury which often makes the farce of the present so joyously endurable. Faith in a less ridiculous world is actually served by the farcical perception of follies. At least half of any folly is not folly at all: from folly springs the perception of excellence. For the tension that exists between two aspects of folly is the source of the fun and the source of the gravity. Mrs. Antrobus's propriety: "Gladys! Put down your dress!! Try and be a lady" contrasts with the radio announcer's description of her as a "gracious and charming wife, every inch a mammal." (*The Skin of Our Teeth*, Act II) Lily Sabina's alternations of hope and despair show the thoughtless but believing animal reconciled through delight to its suffering. From her frenzied energy in the last line of Act I of *The Skin of Our Teeth*: "Pass up your chairs, everybody. Save the human race," she proceeds to despair in "Oh, the world's an awful place. I used to think something could be done about it; but I know better now" (Act III), but reconciles herself to continued effort when she tells George Antrobus:

I'm just an ordinary girl. But you're a bright man, you're a very bright man, and you invented the wheel, and, my God, a lot of things . . . and if you've got any plans, my God, don't let me upset them. Only every now and then I've got to go to the movies. I mean, my nerves can't stand it. But if you have any ideas about improving the crazy old world, I'm really with you. I really am . . . (Act III)

And she is able to tell the audience, with acceptance of the human lot,

This is where you came in. We have to go on for ages and ages yet.

You go home.

The end of the play isn't written yet. (Act III)

As Eric Bentley writes, "Farce can certainly present a grave appearance" (*loc. cit.*, p. 293), and the truth of this remark is evident in Wilder's farces, which also show the falsity of such statements as Chernyshevski's: "Farce sees only surfaces."<sup>2</sup> The brilliant portrait of Lily Sabina, the superficial sensual human being, with all her quick responsiveness, her goodness and weakness and folly, with all her helpless faith—easily lost but eternally renewable—demonstrates the profundity of Wilder's light touch. Lily's conversational style is superbly observed—one cliché falling over another, expressive of longing, endurance, stoicism, alternating with self-indulgence in a perfectly human way. Sympathy is no new thing in farce: in Plautus and Menander the young lovers have the sympathy of the audience: even the

courtesans do, when they help puncture the balloon of pride. Lily gets our sympathy because she is both good and evil, serving forces both of order and chaos—seeking to “take every man away from his wife” (Act II) and commanding the destructive Henry Antrobus (the Cain-principle in man) not to burn his father’s books:

You leave those books alone! Mr. Antrobus is looking forward to them a-special. (Act III)

She wants the serious work of the world to be done, but she doesn’t mind if much of it is done while she enjoys herself at the movies. One must be reconciled to life’s being like this, even if it goes on in this way forever. Faith is the substance of things hoped for. Lily’s language is trite: her feelings as profound as the human soul: depths extending infinitely beneath surfaces. The ordinary embodies and expresses the extraordinary.

Thinness of characterization is alleged against farce. From the stock characters of Plautus to the humours characters of Jonson and Molière, this is a charge that has been by and large allowed to stand. The charge bespeaks the prejudice of the realistic theater, the prejudice of those who would allow life to speak for itself, as some pictorial journalism might. Art however is interpretation, and the stock character provides it in clear, witty, consistent form, with sudden shifts of purpose and direction and attitude substituting for the ambivalences and complexities of the character drawn according to the presumptions of psychological realism. The perception of the ironies of ambivalence is in the serious play productive of an aesthetic attitude demonstrated by a wry sad smile and a shake of the head; the consistency with which the stock character is drawn makes his inconsistencies so startlingly perceptible that the laugh is one of high glee. The moral tone may be the same, the didactic point identical. The joy with which the heavenly destination is pointed out is of the very essence of pure farce. For instance, Mr. Horace Vandergelder, in *The Matchmaker*, demonstrates his heartlessness, his mercenary attitude towards others, when he says, “Marriage is a bribe to make a housekeeper think she’s a householder” (Act I), and again, as an employer, when he says that “Wages are paid to make people do work they don’t want to do.” (Act II) He talks to everyone as if he were their employer, and even, at one point, is so busy discharging people that he discharges persons he does not employ. As his chief clerk says, he “has only one fault, as far as I know, he’s hard as nails; but apart from that, as you say, a charming nature. . . .” (Act II) The farcical reversal which comes when he goes on his knees to the crafty generous Mrs. Levi, the realization that the misanthropist is going to become a more or less willing philanthropist, provides the cream of the jest—“good entertainment with a message you can take home with you,” as Lily Sabina puts it in *The Skin of Our Teeth*. (Act I)

Farce presses the serious view to the absurd, illogical extreme, and in that way it is like religion. George Brush, the hero of *Heaven’s My Destination*, acts upon his principles that the saving of money is wrong, refuses interest on his money, and thereby creates a run on a bank. Some of Mr. Wilder’s most farcical observations are of those for whom money is an end in itself. Thieves and confidence men are engaged in a necessary redistribution of wealth. Malachi says, in *The Matchmaker*:



The law is there to protect property—sure, but the law doesn't care whether a property owner deserves his property or not, and the law has to be corrected. There are several thousands of people in the country engaged in the redistribution of superfluities. A man works all his life and leaves a million to his widow. She sits in hotels and eats great meals and plays cards all afternoon and evening, with ten diamonds on her fingers. Call in the robbers! Call in the robbers! (Act III)

The accumulation of money leads to the self-centered life, and about that there is always something farcical. The employer, to be sure that he gets his money's worth, supervises his employee with ridiculous intensity; the Cabman in *The Matchmaker* says:

I had an employer once. He watched me from eight in the morning until six at night—just sat there and watched me. Oh, dear! Even my mother didn't think I was as interesting as that. (Act III)

The irony is that only the profit motive makes such a person interested in another—and that for the wrong reasons. The person who would take an interest in others for the right reason must sell all that he has and give to the poor. If he won't do it himself, someone else must do it for him—as Mrs. Levi is to do for Mr. Vandergelder when she marries him. She says in *The Matchmaker*:

Money, I've always felt, money—pardon my expression—is like manure; it's not worth a thing unless it's spread about encouraging young things to grow. (Act III)

Mrs. Levi's interest is in living not in possessing. She will possess Mr. Vandergelder's fortune in order to encourage young things to grow. She will keep open house. From this she will get something herself. The logic of enjoying is not cancelled out by the logic of giving. The fool in Christ—like George Brush—must live a life of self-denial. The worldly fool, like Mrs. Levi, takes something from others—a sense of being “a somebody”—“a benefactress to half the town”—“a credit” to the source of the money, Mr. Vandergelder. As Mrs. Levi observes:

Mr. Vandergelder's never tired of saying most of the people in the world are fools, and in a way he's right, isn't he? Himself, Irene, Cornelius, myself! But there comes a moment in everyone's life when he must decide whether he'll live among human beings or not—a fool among fools or a fool alone.

As for me, I've decided to live among them. (Act IV)

The saint often withdraws; the consistent misanthrope withdraws, as Molière's Alceste does; but Mr. Antrobus says, “I don't want any coffee unless I can drink it with some good people.” (*The Skin of Our Teeth*, Act I)

Mrs. Levi's logic is a reconciliation of opposites: it is a faith in humanity, which is to say a faith in fools. We need not know who anyone is before befriending him: enough that he makes claims upon us. That they are young and in love constitutes any young couple's appeal for the grace of mankind.

The usual farcical misunderstandings as to identity, which are made much of in *The Matchmaker*, receive a profound interpretation when Miss Van Huysen, extending hospitality, says, "Come in the kitchen and get warm. . . . We can decide later who everybody is. My dear, would you like a good hot bath?" Like an Homeric king, she will offer baths and food first and ask questions later. Human beings are loved not for their status but for their existence, which it is everyone's job to foster. Observing mankind closely for profit—as fools to be taken advantage of, unsympathetically—is one form of folly. Observing mankind closely for love—as fools to be aided, sympathetically—is another form of folly, and a great deal more fun. Mrs. Levi's fun would make a heaven on earth, and Mr. Vandergelder's a hell. If he is to reach a heavenly destination, he must let Mrs. Levi have what he has; she will give it to the poor.

Yes, we're all fools and we're all in danger of destroying the world with our folly. But the surest way to keep us out of harm is to give us the four or five human pleasures that are our right in the world—and that takes a little money! (Act IV)

Wilder's is not the economics of the New Deal, nor is it the economics of charity: it is a combination of both: confiscatory personal benevolence. Confiscation is justified by miserliness, beneficence by need—need for love, need for experience. And it is to be the kind of benevolence which encourages, not thrift, but a modest prodigality. Cornelius says:

We're going to have a good meal; and we're going to be in danger; and we're going to get almost arrested; and we're going to spend all our money. (*The Matchmaker*, Act I)

And this is an attitude to be encouraged. Indeed, Mr. Wilder makes great fun of ascetic puritanism: "You can't throw people in jail for coming to New York," says Malachi. Mrs. Levi says:

There's nothing wicked about eating in a restaurant.  
There's nothing wicked, even, about being in New York.  
Clergymen just make up those things to fill out their sermons. (Act II)

The dangers of the affluent society are, however, dealt with farcically in Act II of *The Skin of Our Teeth*, where Mrs. Antrobus, at Atlantic City, is shocked by the display of wealth, and by her children's succumbing to it:

I tell you it's a miracle my children have shoes to stand up in. I didn't think I'd ever live to see them pushed around in chairs.

The watchword "Enjoy Yourselves" is a dangerous one. It can lead to Gladys's red stockings, which, symbolically, Mrs. Antrobus covers up with the raincoat she has bought for a rainy day. Her alternative watchword is "Save the family." Much of the fun of Wilder's farces is the liveliness with which they endow the old saws. Nothing can be further from the truth than the statement made by one pair of critics that "farce is commonplace," that it lacks a "symbolic situation."<sup>3</sup> The commonplace, the trite, is vitalized through symbolic situation and symbolic act in Wilder's farces. The result is that

one loves the fool in his folly and, acknowledging one's brotherhood, proceeds in his company to the heavenly destination of love and understanding.

Always there is faith in mankind, if he will only avoid the "Great Man dizziness," if he will only recognize that all people have feelings—not merely the presidents and prize-winners. (*The Skin of Our Teeth*, Act II) There will be, after each disaster to the human race, the new beginning, for which the nine sisters—"sort of music teachers" (Act I)—will have been saved. In our eternal faith in mankind we will continue to educate. George Antrobus tells his wife, "Maggie, put something into Gladys's head on the chance she can use it." (Act I) There is only a chance, but the chances must be taken. Only thus can man experience "the narrow escape. The survival of a handful. From destruction—total destruction." (Act II)

Mankind has however an unfortunate proclivity for the irresponsible. After Mr. Antrobus has invented the wheel, and his rebellious son Henry observes that "you can put a chair on this," the inventor speaks for pure knowledge: "Y-e-e-s, any booby can fool with it now, but I thought of it first." (Act I) The folly of mankind is shared by the prideful devotee of pure knowledge and by the "practical" engineer, quick to apply pure knowledge. Appropriately, Henry, the Cain in mankind, sees the application. Mr Antrobus, the disinterested scientist, virtually acquiesces in turning over the invention to the booby.

The sense of surprise with which one sees the social and economic implications of farcical event; the pleasure with which one sees the full implication of the lightly delivered colloquial speeches—this is the essential wit of Mr. Wilder's farcical method. He leaves us committed to effort, to education, to social experiment, to discovery, to art; to an effort of which we see simultaneously the wonder and the folly, an effort made welcome in the knowledge that we will be saved from the folly only by the wonder, and that the wonder would not be quite so wonderful without the folly.

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<sup>1</sup> Eric Bentley, "Farce," *The Life of the Drama* (Athenaeum, 1964), reprinted in Robert W. Corrigan (ed.), *Comedy Meaning and Form* (San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Company, 1965), p. 292.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted by Robert C. Stephenson, "Farce as Method," *Tulane Drama Review*, V, 2 (1961); reprinted in Corrigan, *op. cit.*, p. 322.

<sup>3</sup> Cleanth Brooks and Robert B. Heilman, *Understanding Drama* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965), p. 139.

# The Americanization of Thornton Wilder

• Donald Haberman

It was not until Thornton Wilder was almost forty that his first novel with an American setting, *Heaven's My Destination*, appeared, first in England in 1934 and then early the next year in the United States. Though the three American plays followed, *Our Town* and *The Merchant of Yonkers* in 1938 and *The Skin of Our Teeth* in 1942, *Heaven's My Destination* remained Wilder's only obviously American novel until this year with the publication of *The Eighth Day*. But *Heaven's My Destination* marks Wilder's arrival on the American scene in more than one way; indirectly it announced that its author had come to terms with American writing as well as adopted Americans and their country for his subject.

In 1938, describing his early novels, Wilder told Ross Parmenter:

For years I shrank from describing the modern world. . . . I was alarmed at finding a way of casting into generalization the world of door bells and telephones. And now, though many of the subjects will often be of the past, I like to feel that I accept the twentieth century, not only as a fascinating age to live in but as assimilable stuff to think with.<sup>1</sup>

It was not the door bells and the telephones themselves that Wilder resisted, but the world that had produced and was using them. For better or for worse, this twentieth century world was an American one.

When *The Woman of Andros*, the novel immediately preceding *Heaven's My Destination*, was published, it provided the excuse for what has become a famous attack on all of Wilder's work up to that time. Michael Gold, writing in *The New Republic*, accused Wilder of gentility, vapidness, and speciousness, all in the cause of comfort, the status quo, and the bourgeoisie. He searched Wilder's novels in vain for

the heroic archaeology of a Walter Scott or Eugene Sue. Those men had social passions, and used the past as a weapon to affect the present and future. . . . The past was a glorious myth [Scott] created to influence the bourgeois anti-feudal present. Eugene Sue was a poet of the proletariat. On every page of history he traced the bitter, neglected facts of the working-class martyrdom. He wove these into an epic melodrama to strengthen the heart and hand of the revolutionary workers, to inspire them with a proud consciousness of their historic mission.

That is how the past should be used; as a rich manure, as a springboard, as a battle cry, as a deepening clarifying and sublimation of the struggles in the too-immediate present.<sup>2</sup>

What Gold wanted, of course, was pamphlets, propaganda, a weapon to be used in the struggle against Wall Street, not novels. If he seems even from the short distance of 37 years funny and more than a trifle pitiful, and even if we feel along with Gold some impatience with those early novels, there is still no explaining away the vicious, unforgivable tone and nasty insinuation of Gold's attack. Wilder, to his credit, never directly answered Gold, though I think that *Heaven's My Destination* is some sort of reply. It is not the one Gold wanted, but then seldom are our demands answered as we would like.

I do not mean to suggest that Michael Gold's *ad hominem* abuse prompted Wilder to change his subject matter, his style, or his ideas. The thinking and writing of Gertrude Stein did that, as Wilder has made abundantly clear.<sup>3</sup> He was already reading Gertrude Stein before *Heaven's My Destination*, though he did not meet her until the book was published, and that reading shows its effects in the novel. There is, however, a special relationship between *The Woman of Andros* and *Heaven's My Destination*.

The title appears in one of the epigraphs to the novel.

George Brush is my name;  
America's my nation;  
Ludington's my dwellingplace  
And Heaven's my destination.

Wilder explains that this is "Doggerel verse which children of the Middle West were accustomed to write in their schoolbooks." This may certainly be true, but it also appears with a significant difference in *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* by James Joyce, a writer for whom Wilder has a particular regard.

Stephen Dedalus is my name,  
Ireland is my nation.  
Clongowes is my dwellingplace  
And heaven my expectation.

Stephen's rather passive but hopeful expectation of heaven is surely far from George's certainty of his destination. George's way may be rough and unclear with much backtracking and many detours, but he knows precisely where he will arrive at the end of his journey. It is the difference between the European attitude and the American.

But the second epigraph, always neglected or accepted without comment, is at least as interesting as the one that provides the book's title: "Of all the forms of genius, goodness has the longest awkward age." It is from *The Woman of Andros* and is a clue to the connection between the two novels as well as a possible key to a way to read *Heaven's My Destination*.

When Wilder was asked by the *Paris Review* interviewer, Richard Goldstone, about the resemblance between Thornton Wilder and George Brush, he replied:

I came from a very strict Calvinistic father, was brought up partly among the missionaries of China, and went to that splendid college at Oberlin at a time when the classrooms and student life carried a good deal of pious didacticism which would now be called narrow Protestantism. . . . That is a very autobiographical book.<sup>4</sup>

He also said that the characterization of Brush is based on his father, perhaps a bit on his brother, Amos, glazed lightly with the charm of Gene Tunney. But the book as an autobiographical statement about the author is what is most interesting. The long awkward age that Wilder struggled through was certainly his coming to some sort of understanding with his own religious impulses, but it was also just as certainly his efforts to fashion a style suitable to the twentieth century and capable of telling what he knew. *The Woman of Andros* was the final work of Wilder's awkward age, just as *Heaven's My Destination* was the first result of his new assurance and knowledge, and the later book can be regarded as a retelling of the earlier one in a new way. But just what had Wilder accepted in the twentieth century "as assimilable stuff to think with," or to put it differently, in what ways is the later book an answer to Michael Gold?

It is important to keep in mind always that Wilder, as the epigraph states flatly, regards goodness as one kind of genius. Pamphilus, the hero of *The Woman of Andros*, wrestles with his goodness with much solemnity, gloom, vows of silence, and the usual suffering of adolescence. Wilder recognized them for what they are, not particularly profound perhaps, but very real in the utter abandon with which they are embraced and in their pain. The Andrian cites "the saying of Plato that the true philosophers are the young men of their age. 'Not,' she would add, 'because they do it very well; but because they rush upon ideas with their whole soul.'"<sup>5</sup> *Heaven's My Destination*, on the other hand, is exhilarating and full of a great vitality, but above all it is supremely comic. There are the same vows of silence, but they produce hilarious misunderstandings more apparently than a profound spiritual condition. The formula for much of the comedy, Wilder found in Cervantes' *Don Quixote*: a fool or madman in possession of an *idée-fixe* confronting the ordinary world. Both the world and fool suffer from the ensuing clash. The bank president, Mr. Southwick, has George arrested when he refuses because of a vow of voluntary poverty to accept the interest his money has earned, but the resulting excitement brings about a run on the bank, and the bank fails.

George is like another of Quixote's children, Parson Adams of *Joseph Andrews*, also a good man. Maynard Mack has described Fielding's treatment of Adams as

partly hero and partly dupe. But he is dupe and hero in a peculiarly complicated way. Dupe at one level, like Quixote, when we see him put upon by every rogue whom he encounters; he is dupe at quite another when we see him self-deceived by a theoretical ideal of conduct that his own nature will not support.<sup>6</sup>

This characterizes George precisely. He is tricked by his friends into having Sunday dinner with and later escorting to the movies a whole house full of "fallen women." But his own ideal persuades him to pursue the girl he "ruined" one night in a barn and, when he finds her, to convince her to enter into a disastrous marriage with him.

But George is different from Quixote and from Parson Adams too, because Wilder's novel is different from those of Cervantes and Fielding. Rather than ridicule or expose certain kinds of human frailty through laughter, Wilder intends by the same means to accept human foolishness and weakness, no matter how absurd or mean. Acceptance does not, however, mean submission, for, as Wilder has stated, the American is "insubmissive to circumstance, destiny, or God."<sup>7</sup> This is why George cannot discover a trace of talent in *King Lear*; he simply does not understand what lies at the base of tragedy. It also explains why George cannot understand Judge Carberry's efforts to help him.

"Go slow; go slow. See what I mean? I don't like to think of you getting into any unnecessary trouble. . . . The human race is pretty stupid. . . . Doesn't do any good to insult 'm. Go gradual. See what I mean?"

"No," said Brush, looking up quickly, puzzled.

"Most people don't like ideas. Well," he added, clearing his throat, "if you do get into any trouble, send me a telegram, see? Let me see what I can do."

Brush didn't understand any of this.<sup>8</sup>

George is neither tragic, nor entirely comic. He is permitted, unlike most comic characters, to develop. Though he remains a type, a timeless example of human behavior, he adjusts, not like a tragic hero as a result of discovering what he is himself, but because he has learned something about the world around him.

This balance or middle ground between tragedy, self-discovery, and comedy, self-exposure, is peculiar to all Wilder's work. He told Walter Trites: "It is this magic unity of purpose and chance, of destiny and accident, that I have tried to describe in my books."<sup>9</sup> Much later he expanded on this idea to Richard Goldstone:

I see myself making an effort to find the dignity in the trivial of our daily life, against those preposterous stretches which seem to rob it of any such dignity; and the validity of each individual's emotion.<sup>10</sup>

In *Heaven's My Destination*, this idea is clearly stated by Bohardus when he is taking George's fingerprints:

"Even if there were a trillion contrillion of them no two'd be alike."

"Isn't that wonderful!" replied Brush, his voice lowered in awe. (p. 25)

The assertion of the uniqueness of the individual in the face of the vast stretches of time and space, both tragic and comic, but really neither, Wilder found also in those masterpieces of the past that are described as comic, but which description every reader feels is inadequate. In one of his Charles

Eliot Norton lectures at Harvard, on Thoreau, Wilder spoke of "the slow attrition of the soul by the conduct of life, of our revolt against the workaday—the background of such works as *Le Misanthrope* and *Don Quixote*."<sup>11</sup> This is the revolt that engages George Brush. "I may be cuckoo," he cries,

"perhaps I am; but I'd rather be crazy all alone than be sensible like you fellows are sensible. I'm glad I'm nuts. I don't want to be different. . . . I'll never change."  
(p. 147)

And when he is accused of being different, he says:

"I didn't put myself through college for four years and go through a difficult religious conversion in order to have ideas like other people's." (p. 36)

The conditions under which George revolts are as Wilder understands them peculiarly American. "Americans," he wrote, "are disconnected. They are exposed to all place and all time. No place nor group nor moment can say to them: we were waiting for you; it is right for you to be here."<sup>12</sup> George says of himself, in spite of having a living mother and father and two older brothers, "I feel like an orphan, too, almost." (p. 81) He is a wanderer, the traveling salesman of countless jokes. He has no home, except perhaps Queenie's boarding house in Kansas City, though which Kansas City is never made clear. He comes from nowhere and is going nowhere but the next town on the railroad line. Although George claims a place in the community of the Baptist Church, it is important to realize that this is more a spiritual community than it is a physical one, and that George's spiritual leaders are also Gandhi and Tolstoi, among others, who are somewhat removed from the Baptist Church.

One of the ways Americans adjust to the disconnection from time and space is to count. The American "can count to higher numbers—and realize the multiplicity indicated by the number—than any European."<sup>13</sup> *Heaven's My Destination*, like the poetry of Walt Whitman, is filled with catalogues: The towns and colleges visited by George, the European names of the people George meets, the songs George sings, and the list of people who work at Camp Morgan, where they come from, and the songs they sing while cleaning up the kitchen. This is the sense of American boundlessness against which the individual must assert his own peculiar individuality. And this assertion is the promise the future holds: Heaven's my destination. George is going somewhere, although it is abstract, "a promise of the imagination."<sup>14</sup> His identity is wrapped up in his goal.

"I am I," the American says, "because my plans characterize me."<sup>15</sup> George has no home, but he lives in part on the dream of founding an American Home. Roberta Weyerhauser is a startlingly unsuitable wife for George, but he knows that they are married already in heaven. The meaning of life is inner, and George has ideas about everything: money, marriage, crime, education, the care of children, and smoking. The comedy and the pathos, too, result when George attempts to realize his theories in the community of other people. He is confronted with a powerful resistance summed up by his friend Louie:



Leave other people's lives alone. Live and let live. Live and let live. Everybody likes to be let alone. (p. 147)

But what Louie says is not strictly true, for no one wants to be let alone. Pamphilus at the conclusion of *The Woman of Andros* sees the world burning eternally in the flames of love—"a sad love that was half hope, often rebuked and waiting to be reassured of its truth." (p. 149) The world does not wish to be reminded of its failures but to be reassured that it is all right in spite of them. The only thing Roberta Weyerhauser wants is for her father to forgive her lapse with George in the barn and to like her again. "She wants papa to have a good opinion of her; that's all," Lottie tells George. (p. 274) She wants this so badly that she is willing to marry George against all common sense. Until George learns to substitute compassion for moral instruction and to distinguish between smoking and the sort of human failure that indifference is, say, he is bound for the cruelest kind of disappointment and what is worse, perhaps, to inflict cruelty upon others. George tells Jessie Mayhew that since his conversion he has not done anything bad *intentionally*. Wilder dramatizes the cruelty inflicted through love in *Heaven's My Destiantion*, as he had spelled it out in *The Woman of Andros*:

His last thought had been the recollection of one of Chrysis's maxims, an ironic phrase which he had chosen to take literally: *The mistakes we make through generosity are less terrible than the gains we acquire through caution.* (pp. 125f.)

George's failures, his disappointments, and his crack-brained behavior are not the end. Wilder said of the great nineteenth century American writers that their being *cracked* "should throw light on a disequilibrium of the psyche which follows on the American condition,<sup>16</sup> the separation from time, place, and community. He wrote about Henry David Thoreau at some length, and I think that his observations may be applied profitably to George Brush.

Thoreau asks, What is life? and he asks it in a world from which any considerable reliance on previous answers is denied him, and through his long inquiry he heard the closing of three doors—doors to great areas of experience on which he counted for aid and illumination, the doors to Love, Friendship, and Nature.<sup>17</sup>

George wants more than anything in the world to found an American Home. Everywhere he travels, he has been looking for a wife. His adventure in the barn with Roberta changes his immediate plan somewhat so that he no longer looks just for a wife, but for Roberta in particular. Blodgett, a fellow traveling salesman, asks, "And you love the girl, huh?"

Brush was displeased with the question. "It's not important if I love her or not," he said. "All I know is that I'm her husband until she or I dies." (p. 44)

When George finally discovers Roberta, he urges her sister Lottie to persuade her to marry him.

"I'll love her pretty well. I'll love her almost perfectly you'll see. She'll never notice the difference." (p. 275)

Later when Roberta wants to leave George, Lottie tells him:

"Go into the kitchen and tell Roberta you love her more than anyone in the world. More than anybody ever loved anybody else. Go on. Go on, do it. That's what a marriage promise is." (p. 289)

He can only protest that it is for the good of society and morals that they stay together. Somehow George never saw a real woman in his American Home and never understood that that home should grow out of love, not from an idea. Wilder wrote of Thoreau: "The door of love closed and he never returned to it."<sup>18</sup> We do not see the end of George's story, and we may believe what we choose.

George was to have no greater success with friendship. The first big secret disappointment in George's life, he says, is "that at college the fellows never elected me to one of the three literary societies." (p. 83) And he is no happier with the boys in Queenie's boarding house. They accept him only because of his extraordinary tenor voice, but neither he nor they can learn to live with the facts of the other, and friendship ends when they beat George up and throw him out. The most extended and interesting attempt at friendship is that between George and George Burkin, the movie director. They are closer to each other than either would admit, but as things stand in George's development at the time he meets Burkin (and in Burkin's too), there is no chance of their achieving any harmony. They are both unaccommodating individuals, one a good man and one an artist, and perhaps they represent two apparently conflicting aspects of Wilder's own personality. What Wilder accomplished in his career as writer was to bring the two together in harmony. Like Wilder, Burkin looks in windows at people who do not know they are being observed, and he sees their very souls. He can understand *King Lear*. And like the good artist he is, he never explains, he never tries to put the "idiots out of their misery." George, on the other hand, explains himself at great length every chance he gets in the hope of putting the idiots out of their misery by converting them. The lesson Burkin seems to know almost instinctively is one Wilder learned with some effort. He told Richard Goldstone:

I've spent a large part of my life trying to sit on it [his didacticism] to keep it down. The pages and pages I've had to tear up! I think the struggle with it may have brought a certain kind of objectivity into my work.

If Burkin gets thrown in jail because he refuses to explain, Wilder pays his price too, the misunderstanding of his readers. He added, "I've become accustomed to readers' taking widely different views of the intentions in my books and plays."<sup>19</sup>

The difficulty with George and Burkin is that neither is really complete without the other. George explains that his religious conversion took place at a tent meeting, and that the inspiration of the girl evangelist was produced by drugs. Burkin cannot see that whatever the source, George's religious life is real and meaningful, and that although the original emotional response was prompted by a "sixteen-year-old girl while she was hopped up with drugs," it has developed through thinking and study, particularly of Gandhi. George's feeling could bring some meaning to what Burkin sees through windows;

what George needs is a little more looking *silently* through windows to see what people, neither good nor bad, really are. Both men are desperately interested in each other, but their efforts at friendship collapse, and Burkin angrily drives off without saying good-bye to George or shaking his hand, leaving him bitterly disappointed.

Wilder observed that Americans break their lives "on an excessive demand for the perfect, the absolute, and the boundless in realms where it is accorded to few—in love and friendship."<sup>20</sup> Those Americans who fall at love and friendship sometimes for comfort turn to the final item on the list of areas of experience which closed in Thoreau's life, to Nature. We hear George ask: "Isn't the principle of a thing more important than the people that live under the principle?" The only answer is Lottie's: "Nobody's strong enough to live up to the rules." (p. 290) Although George goes twice on his birthday in happy circumstances to a pond to meditate alone like Thoreau, I think that Nature in *Heaven's My Destination* is best seen as Human Nature and the world of human event. Here again George fails, though he thinks he is failed in turn.

George visits his sometime friend Herb in the hospital to hear him say, "I'm on the point of croaking, and I don't care if I do." (p. 186) "I'm glad I'm clearing out." (p. 189) Like Simon Stimson in *Our Town*, Herb is attached to the world and living by hate, but he *is* attached though George cannot see this. The interview with Herb precipitates George as close to despair as he has come up to this point. He tells Queenie:

I don't want to go on living in a world where things like that can happen. Something's the matter with the world, through and through. . . . Wouldn't it be terrible *if I lost my faith?* . . . Even . . . then . . . I'd go on . . . just as I am, I guess. . . . Only, I wouldn't get any pleasure out of it. The world isn't worth living in for its own sake.  
(pp. 190f.)

Finally, after the failure of his American Home, George does lose his faith, but he does not go on. True to his theory about sickness coming from having lost all hope, he falls sick and is about to die. George had refused to recognize that the world was not all good, that evil and suffering were *naturally* a part of it. He chose to see only those aspects that were favorable to his view of Nature. When Nature forced itself on him in its horror as well as its delight, he revolted. George had to learn to call Cain into the Ark through love, like Mrs. Antrobus in *The Skin of Our Teeth*, and to decide like Mrs. Levi in *The Matchmaker* to live among human beings, a fool among fools, to join the human race. And like Pamphilus, he must learn to repeat, "I praise all living, the bright and the dark." (p. 162)

George must acquire two more truths that Pamphilus had learned. The first is an obvious one: not to "doubt that the conviction at the heart of your happiness was as real as the conviction at the heart of your sorrow." (p. 161) The second is repeatedly dramatized in *Heaven's My Destination*, though it is never expressly stated as it is in *The Woman of Andros*: "how strangely life's richest gift flowered from frustration and cruelty and separation." (pp. 148f.)

George watched Herb die, cursing his mother who is full of gin, his family living from which he shrank in disgust, and his wife who has run off with somebody who was passing through town, and this inexplicable and unjustified human suffering almost brought George to the point of losing his faith. But at the same time George receives a great gift, which it must be added contains the seeds of an even greater disappointment. He "inherits" Herb's daughter, Elizabeth, and love is renewed—between Elizabeth and George, and between Elizabeth and Roberta, between Elizabeth and Roberta's parents, and even between Elizabeth and Queenie. Elizabeth may bring pain to all these people, just as Roberta did to her family, but if they did not love her so much, if she were not so wonderful for them, she could not do it. Living and dying, pain and joy, are intimately united. The one does not exist without the other.

Wilder said that Thoreau did not triumph, but I think that George Brush does, and in a way that is peculiar to Wilder's vision of American living. George recovers from his sickness, and he continues on his journey, literal and symbolic, almost exactly as before, but with a very significant difference. He has arranged to put a waitress through college because he found her reading Darwin's *The Cruise of the "Beagle."* Earlier in the novel George had attacked Darwin's views, saying that a person had to be very *ordinary* to have ideas like Darwin's. George may possibly disagree as strongly as before with the notions of evolution and survival, but he can see without prejudice that the ordinary is extraordinary enough. He has lost his parochial point of view; he has learned to count and to recognize and delight in difference and multiplicity.

George's second conversion is triggered by a spoon left to him by Father Pasziewski, who never appears in the novel, though George learns from time to time that the priest thinks often of him and is in fact praying for him. His life is full of pain and disappointment. He is sick and knows he is going to die. His youth groups are a disaster; the Knights of St. Ludowick are practically gangsters, and Mary's Flowers have become taxi-dancers. His parishioners are without work and have little to eat but cabbage. On the day he is dying, he leaves a perfectly ordinary, silver-plated spoon to George to remember him by, because it might be useful. From the moment George receives it, he recovers. This homely gift from beyond the grave is a witness to the goodness and hope in living, in spite of all suffering, anguish, and disappointment. It must be kept in mind that it is precisely Father Pasziewski's failures and his death that make his faith valid.

Here is the answer to Michael Gold. American twentieth century living cannot be grasped only by descriptions of migrant workers, social injustice, and an unfair economic system. It is deeper than any of these things; it is the very souls of the people seen when you look through their windows and watch them unknowing at their daily tasks. American life is by definition desperately lonely. Wilder knows the terrors of the ordinary man. Mrs. Solario, to encourage the men who want to save Roberts from committing suicide at Camp Morgan, tells them what's in store for him if he chooses life:

life's a big thrill. . . . Tell him to stick around; we're going to have some more world wars. He'll love it. Tell

him from me the depression's only begun. . . . Sure, he oughta wait around awhile until his kids grow up and call him an old boob. Why, he doesn't know the half of it yet. Old age is great, too. (pp. 97f.)

Though these are the facts, this is not all the truth for an American, because opposed to all the facts, an American has the future and its promise: Heaven's my destination. Wilder asked at the conclusion of his Thoreau essay: "Is there a Thoreau who can tell us that once one has grasped and accepted a basic solitude, all the other gifts come pouring back—love, friendship, and nature?"<sup>21</sup> His own writing beginning with *Heaven's My Destination* has tried to answer, "George Brush *may* be that man. Emily Webb. Antrobus. Caesar. Alcestis. Yes."

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Ross Parmenter, "Novelist into Playwright," *Saturday Review of Literature*, XVIII (June 11, 1938), p. 10.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Gold, "Wilder: Prophet of the Genteel Christ," *The New Republic*, LXIV (Oct. 22, 1930), p. 266.

<sup>3</sup> See my book, *The Plays of Thornton Wilder* (Middletown, Conn., 1967).

<sup>4</sup> Malcolm Cowley, ed., *Writers at Work* (New York, 1958), p. 104.

<sup>5</sup> Thornton Wilder, *The Woman of Andros* (New York, 1930), p. 32. All further page references to this book will appear in the text.

<sup>6</sup> Introduction to Henry Fielding, *Joseph Andrews* (New York, 1948) by Maynard Mack, p. x.

<sup>7</sup> Thornton Wilder, "Toward an American Language," *Atlantic*, CXC (July 1952), p. 31.

<sup>8</sup> Thornton Wilder, *Heaven's My Destination* (New York, 1935), p. 247. All further references to this book will appear in the text.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in Walter Trites, "Thornton Wilder in Berlin," *Living Age*, (Sept. 1931), p. 45.

<sup>10</sup> *Writers at Work*, p. 114.

<sup>11</sup> Thornton Wilder, "The American Loneliness," *Atlantic*, CXC (August, 1952), p. 32.

<sup>12</sup> "Toward an American Language," p. 32.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>17</sup> "The American Loneliness," p. 66.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67.

<sup>19</sup> *Writers at Work*, p. 111.

<sup>20</sup> "The American Loneliness," p. 68.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.

# To Thornton Wilder: A Note in Gratitude

• R. W. Stallman

An editor of a literary journal published some of my earliest attempts at poems and arranged for my meeting Thornton Wilder at four o'clock one autumn afternoon (1934) on the Midway. He got me to tell him all about my life (I was then twenty-three), as though the things that had happened long ago had somehow great importance towards revealing what likelihood there might be for my becoming a poet or a writer. Thereafter we met on Fridays at his top-floor apartment overlooking the Midway and went out for supper at a crowded, full-of-life cafe on nearby 63rd Street with its elevated train screeching above the laughter of men gathered around the cafe's noisy piano. T. N. liked to poke into such honky-tonks so as to renew acquaintance with *How the Other Half Lives*. He gave me an inscribed copy of Rainer Maria Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet*.

One afternoon we were approached by an elderly woman who asked where such and such an address might be, and T. N. walked a couple of blocks down the street to locate the exact house for this stranger and then returned to the corner where he had left me. It was his nature always to go out of his way for others. He befriended a group of beginning artists and writers: a painter (Miss Abercrombie), a philosopher (Robert Davis), who later went to Europe to visit and interview Gertrude Stein, and a dramatist (Robert Ardrey), whose first play made its Broadway appearance a few years later. Occasionally, T. N. had us in for a party at his apartment. He was teaching creative writing and the classics in translation at the University of Chicago (1930 to 1936), and I once visited his packed classroom of undergraduate students while he paced the floor with Dante's *Inferno* in one hand, while with the index finger of his other hand he put into italics every point he uttered. He staged a most dramatic performance, impassioned even when he voiced his insights in whispered innuendo. More than a decade later he held spellbound a thousand professors gathered in New York City to hear his featured address on Lope de Vega at a Modern Language Association meeting. During the winter of 1934 when I was very ill with shingles, he visited me at Billings Hospital a day or two after the publication of *Heaven's My Destination* and presented me with a copy. Not many days later when I was having lunch with him in his apartment, he phoned Western Union to send a telegram, but the operator had difficulty spelling out his name, and he turned to me and jokingly remarked: "She doesn't know my name!" He was imitating the brashness of the hero of his comic novel. On one occasion when I mimicked someone I disliked, he admonished me against mimicry—it was

a dangerous trapdoor to be shunned. Himself the exemplar of the cultured gentleman, he was addicted to admonishing youth in what Conrad calls the code of moral conduct. In some twenty letters he subsequently wrote me, he advised not to rebel against academic authorities, because by conforming I would spare myself much wasted energies and gain thereby a reservoir for my writings. Lord Jim's father, who managed the largest parsonage the world has ever known, advised his son to submit to society ("the destructive element") rather than to rebel against it. Lord Jim didn't listen to his old man, and I never heeded Thornton Wilder's advice and endured the consequences.

Sir William Craigie, a wiry old Scotsman then laboring at his dictionary in a musty room lined with thousands of annotated strips of paper, used to bounce up the stairs and cough "Hem-hem" over each piece of paper he thumbed and filed away, and at my remarking that the old boy ought to retire, T. N. contradicted my notion with the advice that a man ought to work until he drops dead. He himself had so much bounce, gusto, and zeal that he unnerved some students and made uncomfortable a very opinionated old lady named Elsie White of the White Star Line living then at the Drake Hotel. I knocked at the door of her suite to deliver some papers from Robert Hutchins, President of the University of Chicago, and was invited in for tea and chitchat. Hours later, supper was brought up, and all the while as messenger boy I was earning seventy-five cents per hour. "Would you mind if I aided you?" asked Elsie P. White. And so she wrote me a cheque of \$400, and I bounced out of the Drake Hotel and walked several miles back to my rooming house in the tune of "Joy to the World." Alexander Woolcott was saying something as we walked down the Midway from T. N.'s apartment, and when I injected a few words into his momentarily halted speech, he turned on me with "Young man, I have always managed to finish my own sentences." Then he swung his cane and talked on uninterrupted. That spring of 1935 Gertrude Stein lectured at the University and stayed in Thornton Wilder's apartment, and one afternoon as she was driving me down the Midway in her car, I boldly asked whether she too did not find herself exhausted after a stint at writing, and she replied: "Indeed, I do!"

During that winter of my prolonged illness from shingles, I was receiving financial aid from the University of Chicago, whose Secretary had heard of my plight and had called me into his office to offer me \$40 per month. His secretary (Mrs. Ruth Gay) later told me that the money had been donated by Thornton Wilder. "In token appreciation for his sponsorship of an apprentice poet and critic 1934-1935" I dedicated to Thornton Wilder my *Houses That James Built and Other Literary Studies* (1961).

# Embroidery

*To and for a Birthday*  
T.N.W. April 17, 1897-1967

● Isabel Wilder

Here are six sentences, a brief dialogue, and some extra words. The dialogue is reconstructed from a correspondence; the sentences I have heard my brother, Thornton Wilder, repeat on various occasions, one or perhaps two at a time, like a prescription: a teaspoon, a tablespoon as required. The words are jarring familiar reminders.

Like a sermon built on a text and delivered from a pulpit is my use of these sentences, the dialogue, and the extra words as a pattern for embroidery. I see the design as a skeleton, not human but, rather, a primitive, colorful drawing of an ancient oak tree in barren winter.

A tree has branches on which to hang things; it can thus be clothed with objects both real and imaginary that swing in a breeze and acquire the semblance of movement and life; gay, transparent, true, and false; solid and solemn things fluttering here and there together. The wind does not discriminate between thoughts, ideas, facts, wishes, and hopes, for example. Accomplishment and failure, joy and grief have not different shapes and weights and colors when they are furled from a tree tip or laid away in the dark.

First, I hang on an extended limb, quoting T.W.:

*"I seem to have gone through my youth and college years a sleepwalker."*

Second, placed to balance the far side:

*"The young must have an idol in their hearts."*

Three, hung not too far away:

*"Every boy between the ages of twelve to fifteen is a genius for a little while, if only when bent over his stamp album."*

Four, set middle center (paraphrasing Goethe):

*"Beware of what you wish for in your youth because you may well receive it in middle age."*

Fifth, high center:

*"For one who with pickax has laid bare a two-thousand-year-old highway the world is never the same again. He sees the archaeologists two thousand years from now saying of Times Square and Piccadilly Circus, 'There seems to have once been considerable activity here.'"*

Next comes, interjected among the sentences, the brief dialogue entwining several branches with a glint of sparkle, for it is a sign of youth's brave effort and bravado:

T. W., after having spent hours reading an extra thick typescript of a novel by a young man, a stranger who had sent his work without warning from far away to be appraised; and after spending with goodwill more hours writing a constructive letter, praising what could be praised, giving encouragement to the limit of the promise revealed, and thus having won the right to offer a few complaints and advices since "comment" had been requested:



*"... to sum up, you seemed not to have worked hard enough."*

The reply by airmail special delivery—offended to the point of outrage—all praise, encouragement, constructive help denied:

*"... not worked hard enough! You don't seem to realize that I retyped the whole thing, 346 pages of it, three times. Yes, three times! That's work!"*

T. W. started a return note hoping to clarify his complaint. The first sentence read:

*"I was talking about the work before the typing of the first version was even begun . . ."* Another typescript waited to be "appraised."

Now the last sentence, the sixth, hung on a lower branch close to hand:  
*"A wastepaper basket is the author's best friend."*

The words are ready to fill out the spaces left empty in the design; also the measured lengths of embroidery threads, clear and dark blue, clean green, deep red, sun yellow, silver and white. The needle is threaded. Suddenly, as I bend to the stitching, I find the pattern has changed. Before my eyes, a tree hung with the attributes, needs, and blessings of the human being has taken on his form. The outline is faint yet there's the tracing of a man—writer, artist, composer, teacher, scientist, leader? I must continue hanging these single words here and there in colors to learn if the whole will shine through.

Words for the active sleepwalker (not the lost night daydreamer fumbling pitifully through webs to despair and disease), the day sleepwalker with his insatiable hungers and thirsts.

For the fortunate young who carry an idol in the heart, a changing ever greater one.

For the girl and boy at that suspended moment between twelve and fifteen who can concentrate with a single-minded passion that is genius.

Words also for him who must select now what a low tide may lay bare in his lap at middle age.

And for one, pickax in hand, discovering everlasting time on each horizon, thus learning to take his own measure.

Words to remember to the point of heartbreak when the need comes to stretch beyond the self to make the novel, the painting, the song, and life itself good enough.

And always the waste basket close at hand so there may be a second beginning.

#### THE PORTRAIT

Man            God  
Earth Time Heaven  
Hearth Home Sun Moon Star  
Languages North South East West History  
Music Painting Sculpture Test Tubes Numbers  
Poets Teachers Leaders Seers Heroes  
Theaters Museums Opera Ballet  
Chapels Churches Cathedrals  
North East South West  
The world is so full of  
a number of things  
I'm sure we all  
should be as  
HAPPY as  
kings

## Late November

• Dianne K. Sisko

On dark blue evenings  
of late November cold  
always returning, being led,  
my hand held, wind loud and hollow,  
led home, to glowing yellowness  
and breath-stifling overwarmth  
and large, hot mugs, smoking  
from the magic inside—  
always longing for cold again,  
feeling unfree, vaguely poisoned  
by the sweet fluid heat-veil over my senses  
longing for cold again, the air  
painful in the lungs  
and brightness  
wild in the eyes  
in the cold  
in the dark blue  
November night.

## Honolulu Airport Bar

• Paul S. Nelson, Jr.

One of those meditating  
Paradise lights of jaded  
Red and blue and white,  
But mostly green, playing  
Here and there on tables,  
Lights on spit shined pates  
Hunched over beers unwanted,  
Khaki killers of aesthetic taste,  
Sergeants, sad synecdoches  
For all the polished hate  
That plies beneath the sun  
In mordant simplicity of dress.  
About them, young adoring zealots,  
Box tops in their pockets,  
Keep their covers on to  
Hide their plucked and modest heads,  
Sparse, as if diseased, as if  
To die in bed, not by bullets.  
Mouths that sucked but recently,  
Ringed with nervous outburst,  
The only pregnant image there.



## Contributors

**R**ICHARD H. GOLDSTONE, who teaches at City College of New York, has been commissioned by Harper and Row, publishers, to collect materials toward a biography of Thornton Wilder. JOHN N. MILLER had a poem, "The Skeleton," in the January issue of this magazine. HANS SAHL, a German novelist, translated *Our Town* and *The Skin of Our Teeth*; he is now living in New York City. THOMAS KRETZ, a member of the Society of Jesus, had a poem, "Second Class Beatitudes," in the March issue. JOSEPH J. FIREBAUGH is chairman of English, Flint College, the University of Michigan, and frequently contributes to scholarly journals. DONALD HABERMAN is on the staff of the University of Montana. He is the author of a new book, *The Plays of Thornton Wilder*, published by the Wesleyan University Press. R. W. STALLMAN, a former student of Wilder's, is a member of the faculty of the University of Connecticut, in the college of liberal arts and sciences. His biography of Stephen Crane is nearing completion. ISABEL WILDER is the author's devoted sister, who, as Richard Goldstone says in his article, "has seen to it that there has been a home waiting for her brother when his journeys end"; **four quarters** is deeply grateful for her help and encouragement in the planning, by associate editor John J. Keenan, of this special number. DIANNE K. SISKI had two of her poems in the March number of this magazine. PAUL S. NELSON, JR. is a poet who teaches in the Department of English at Colgate University, Hamilton, New York. The inside cover illustration is by GERARD LEAHY, a La Salle alumnus, now completing his studies at the Yale School of Drama.

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